

Matthew Arnold's "Dover Beach"

1. This poem is a dramatic monologue:

Characteristics of a dramatic monologue:

1. somebody is speaking
2. the whole poem is the character's speech
3. the character is in a dramatic setting; there is a particular audience, time, and place.
4. the reader must determine from hints in the poem:
 - A. the identity of the speaker
 - B. the identity of the audience & the relationship between them
 - C. the setting & time
 - D. the speaker's purpose.

The whole poem is the speech of one unidentified male character addressed to a unidentified woman, presumably his beloved. There is no dramatic interaction between them in that the female listener is silent throughout the poem. Everything about the passive listener and the dramatic situation is revealed in the speech of the speaker. The time is night and the place is a room with a window overlooking Dover beach in England. The speaker is a mature male with a philosophical temperament. He seems to be melancholic as he broods over the darkening prospectus of the Victorian age.

2. This poem is a critical reflection on the Victorian age and how it is being caught in the chaos of the clash between science and religion. The speaker starts by delineating the dramatic situation. The atmosphere being invoked is calm and the mood is meditative. The speaker meditates on the sea and its calmness. Although the atmosphere is tranquil, the speaker can hear an "eternal note of sadness." The speaker, then, amplifies this note of sadness into a note of universal tragedy by invoking the Greek tragedian Sophocles. The speaker identifies this universal tragedy of human existence as due to the loss of religious faith. The literal sea he invoked at the beginning of the poem becomes "the sea of Faith." In the past it was in full tide but now it is retreating exposing the "naked shingles of the world." The speaker invokes "love" as the only available means of a positive

human existence. He finds the world lacking in truth and honesty by showing that the glittering reality of this world is in sharp contrast with its dark reality. Human situation is hopeless as this world lacks joy, love, light, certitude, peace, and mercy. The ultimate cause for this human misery is the clash between science and religion in the Victorian age. The last three lines of the poem pin point the dark situation of the Victorian age and its cause. The speaker offers a symbolic war scene full of confusion and bloodshed. The “ignorant armies” stand for science and religion as they clash in the wake of Darwinism. The “clash” results in doubt and uncertainty that dominated the intellectual atmosphere of the Victorian age. Hence, the age is represented as “darkling plain” and the armies clash “by night” which is a clear reference to the Victorian age as a jungle where survival is for the fittest.